

LITTLE WHITE FROCK

WHEN their careers are finished, the painter, the author, the architect, the sculptor, may point to this or that, and say, "Lo, this is my handiwork. Future generations shall rejoice in me."

But to the actor and the executive musician there is nothing left but — memories.

Their permanence lies in the memories of the people who loved them. They cannot pass it on. Some one may say to you, "Ah, my boy, you should have heard Jean de Reszke," or, "You should have seen Macready play that part." And you are bound in all politeness to accept this verdict, but if you have not heard Jean de Reszke, nor seen Macready, it leaves no definite impression on you at all. Indeed, the actor is in worse case than the musician. For at the present time there are ingenious mechanical devices for caging the performance of a musician with varying degrees of success, but no mechanism could ever imprison the electric thrill of Joseph Jefferson or Henry Irving on their great nights of triumph. They are gone forever, cast away among the limbo of the myths.

These melancholy reflections occurred to me on the first occasion when I visited Colin Brancker. I met the old chap first of all in the public library. He had

a fine, distinguished head, with long, snow-white hair. He was slim, and in spite of a pronounced stoop, he carried himself with a certain distinction and alertness. I was a fairly regular visitor to the library, and I always found him devouring the magazines and newspapers which I particularly wanted to read myself. A misunderstanding about a copy of the *Saturday Review* led to a few formal expressions of courtesy, on the following day to a casual nod, later on to a few words about the weather; then to a profound bow on his part and an inquiry after his health from me. Once we happened to be going out at the same time, and I walked to the end of the road with him.

He interested me at once. His clear, precise diction, with its warm *timbre* of restrained emotion, was very arresting. His sympathy about the merest trifles stirred you to the depths. If he said, "What a glorious day it is to-day!" it was not merely a conventional expression, but a kind of pæan of all the joy and ecstasy of spring life, sunshine and young lambs frisking in the green meadows.

If he said, "Oh! I'm so sorry," in reply to your announcement that you had lost your 'bus ticket coming along and had had to pay twice, the whole dread incident appeared to you envisaged through a mist of tears. The grief of Agamemnon weeping over the infidelity of Clytemnestra seemed but a trite affair in comparison.

One day, with infinite tact, he invited me to his "humble abode." He occupied the upper part of a small house in Talbot Road. He lived alone, but was

apparently tended by a gaunt, middle-aged woman who glided about the place in felt slippers.

The rooms were, as he expressed it, "humble," but not by any means poverty-stricken. He had several pieces of old furniture and bric-à-brac, innumerable mementoes and photographs. It was then that I realized the peculiar position of the actor. If he had been a painter I could have looked at some of his work and have "placed" him; but what could you do with an old actor who lived so much in the past? The position seemed to me pitiable.

Doubtless in his day he had been a fine and distinguished actor, and here was I, who knew nothing about him, and did not like to ask what parts he had played because I felt that I ought to know. Neither was he very informing. Not that he was diffident in speech — he talked well and volubly — but I had to gather what he had done by his various implications. There was a signed photograph of himself in the character of Malvolio, and in many other Shakespearean parts. There were also signed photographs of J. L. Toole and Henry Irving, and innumerable actors, some of whom were famous and others whose names were unfamiliar to me. By slow degrees I patched together some of the romantic tissues of his life. Whatever position he may have held in the theatrical world, he certainly still had the faculty of moving one person profoundly — myself. Everything in that little room seemed to vibrate with romance. One of Irving's photographs was inscribed "To my dear old friend, Colin

Brancker." On the circular table was an enamel snuff-box given him by Nellie Farren.

When he spoke of his mother his voice sounded like some distant organ with the *vox humana* stop pulled out. I gathered that his mother had been a famous French actress. On the piano was a fan given her by the Empress Eugénie. He never spoke of his father. Nearly everything had some intimate association.

I formed a habit of calling on old Brancker on Thursday evenings, when my wife usually visited an invalid aunt. The experience was always a complete entertainment. He knew nothing of my world and I knew nothing of his. I came completely under the spell of his imagery. I had only to touch some trinket on the mantelpiece to set the whole machinery of retrospection on the move. He came haltingly to his subject as though he were feeling for it through the lavender-scented contents of some old drawer. But when the subject was discovered, he brought the whole picture vividly before my mind. I could see those people strutting before the footlights, hear them laugh and joke in their stuffy lodgings and their green-rooms, follow their hard life upon the road, their struggles, and adversities, and successes, and above all the moving throb of their passions and romances.

And then the picture would die out. It had no beginning and no end. It was just an impression. The angle of vision would alter. Something else would appear upon the scene.

After a time, touched with pity for this lonely and

derelict old actor, my wife and I occasionally sent him little presents of game and port wine, when such things came our way. I would like to explain, at this point, that my wife is younger than I. Her outlook is less critical and introspective. To use her own expression, she is out to have a good time. She enjoys dances and theaters and gay parties. And, after all, why shouldn't she? She is young and beautiful and full of life. Her hair — but I digress! In spite of the pheasants and the port, she had never met old Brancker. But one day we all happened to meet at the corner of the Talbot Road. I then enjoyed an entirely novel vision of my hero. He was magnificent. The bow he made, the long sweep of the hat, would have put d'Artagnan to shame. When I introduced them, he held her hand for a moment, and said:

"It is indeed a great pleasure."

It doesn't sound very much in print, but Alice completely went under. She blushed with pleasure, and told me afterwards that she thought he was "a perfect old dear." The affair lapsed for several weeks. I still continued to call upon him, and we nearly exhausted the whole gamut of his belongings. We even routed through old drawers where faded remnants of ancient fustian would recall some moving episode of the past. I became greedy for these visionary adventures.

One night, rather late, I found the little white frock. So familiar had I become with my old friend that I was allowed to poke about his room on my own, and ask him questions. It was a child's frock, and it lay

neatly folded on the top of a chest in the passage. I brought it into the room, where he was sipping his rum-and-water, and said:

"What's this, Mr. Brancker?"

He fixed his eyes upon the frock, and instantly I was aware that he was strangely moved. At first an expression of surprise and bewilderment crept over his face; then I observed a look of utter dejection and remorse. He did not speak, and rather confusedly I went up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Doubtless there is some story. . . . I ought not to have . . ."

Instantly he patted my arm in return, and muttered:

"No, no. It's all right, old boy. I will tell you. Only, not to-night. No, not to-night."

He stood up and took one or two turns up and down the room in silence. I did not dare to intrude into the secret chamber of his memories. Suddenly he turned to me, and putting his arm round my shoulder, he exclaimed:

"Old boy, come in to-morrow. Come to dinner. Bring the wife. Yes, you must both come. Come to dinner at seven-thirty. And then — I will tell you the story of that little white frock."

It happened that a dance my wife had intended going to the following night had fallen through. To my surprise, she jumped at Mr. Brancker's invitation. She said that she thought it would be extremely interesting. I felt a little nervous at taking her. An invitation to dinner for the first time is always a doubtful number.

The social equation varies so alarmingly and unexpectedly. My wife frequently dined at what she called "smart" houses. How could old Brancker possibly manage a dinner in his poky rooms? I warned her to wear her oldest and shabbiest, and to have a sandwich before we started. Needless to say, my advice was ignored. She appeared in a wonderful gown of pearl-gray. Experience told me it was useless to protest, and I jogged along the street by her side in my tweed suit. And then I had my second surprise. Old Brancker was in immaculate evening-dress. Cunningly-modulated lights revealed a table glittering with silver and glass. I mumbled some apology for my negligence, but in his most courtly way he expressed his pleasure that I had treated him with such friendly lack of ceremony. Nevertheless this question of dress — as so often happens — exercised a very definite effect upon my whole evening. I felt a little out of it. My wife and old Brancker seemed to belong to one world and I to another. Moreover, their conversation flowed easily and naturally. The old actor was in his most brilliant mood, and Alice sparkled and gurgled in response. Although she was younger and Brancker older than I, I felt at times that I was the oldest of the three, and that they were just children playing an absorbing game. And the dinner was the third surprise.

The gaunt woman served it, gliding in and out of the room with a quiet assurance. It was no lodging-house dinner, but the artful succession of little dishes which symbolizes the established creed of superior-living crea-

tures. Wine, too, flowed from long-necked bottles, and coffee was served in diminutive cups. At length, Mrs. Windsor collected the last vestiges of this remarkable feast, but left on the table a silver tray on which were set four liqueur glasses and a decanter of green Chartreuse.

"Let us all sit round the fire," said our host. "But, first, let me press you to have a little of this excellent beverage. It was given me by a holy brother, a man who led a varied life, but who, alas! died in disgrace."

He passed his hand across his brow as though the memory were too sacred to be discussed. I sighed involuntarily, and my wife said brightly:

"Not for me, Mr. Brancker; but you help yourself. And now you're going to tell us the story of the white frock."

He raised his fine head and looked at her. Then he stretched out his long arm across the table and gently pressed her hand.

"I beg of you, dear lady," he said gently, "just one drop in memory of my friend."

The implied sanctity of the appeal could not be denied. Both my wife and I partook of half a glass, and though I am by nature an abstainer, I must acknowledge that it tasted very good. Old Brancker's hand trembled as he poured out the Chartreuse. He drank his at a gulp, and as though the emotion were not yet stilled, he had another one. Then he rose, and, taking my wife's arm, he led her to the easy chair by the fire. I was rather proud of my intimate knowledge of the

old actor's possessions, and I pointed out the snuff-box which Nellie Farren had given him, and the photograph of Irving, with its inscription "To my dear old friend."

Brancker sighed and shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps one does not boast of these associations. Perhaps it is vulgar, but I knew how interested Alice would be. When we had done a round of the rooms, whither in his fatherly way he had conducted my wife by the arm, and occasionally rested his hand ever^{so} lightly on her shoulder, we returned to the dining-room, and Alice said:

"Now show me this little white frock!"

He bowed, and without a word went out into the hall, and returned with the frock, which he spread reverently over the back of a chair.

"How perfectly sweet!" said my wife.

For a few moments he buried his head in his hands, and Alice and I were silent. I could not but observe the interesting *mise-en-scène* in which I found myself. The dim recesses of the room, heavy with memories. My wife cozily curled up in the high arm-chair, the firelight playing on her fresh, almost childlike, face, a simple ring sparkling on her finger, and on the pearly glint of her diaphanous gown. On the other side of the table where the little glasses stood, the clear-cut features and long snow-white hair of the old actor, silhouetted against a dark cabinet. And then, like some fragile ghost recalled to bear witness to its tragic past, the dim outline of the child's white frock.

"It was before your time, *mes enfants*, long, long before your time," he said suddenly. "You would not remember the famous Charles Carside Company who starred the provinces. We became known as the Capacity Company. The title was doubly-earned. We always played to full houses, and in those days —"

He turned to me with a penetrating, almost challenging look, and added:

"There were *actors*. Comedy, and tragedy, history, everything worth doing, in the legitimate, was in our repertoire. We changed our bill every night, and sometimes twice a day. Ay, and we changed our parts, sir. I remember Terry O'Bane and I reversing the parts of Othello and Iago on alternate nights for two weeks at a stretch. I played Lord Stamford to his Puttick in 'The Golden Dawn.' He played Shylock to my Bassanio. I will not bore you with these details. Ah! poor old Terry! Poor dear old Terry!"

He stopped and looked down at his hands, and neither of us spoke.

"When I say that Terry O'Bane and I were friends, I want to tell you that we were friends as only artists can be friends. We loved each other. For three years we worked together side by side — never a suspicion of envy, never a suspicion of jealousy. I remember one night, after Terry's delivery of Jaques' speech on the fool, he did not get a hand. I found him weeping in the wings. 'Old fellow!' I said, but he gripped me by the arm. 'Colly boy,' he answered, 'I was thinking of you. I knew how distressed you would be!'

Think of that! His only concern was that *I* should be distressed. Ah! in those days . . .”

He stretched his long white fingers and examined them; then, turning suddenly to my wife, he said:

“I want to ask you, mademoiselle” (he persisted in calling her ‘mademoiselle’ all the evening), “to make allowances in what I am about to tell you for the *tempora et mores*. In my young days love had a different significance to what it has now. In this modern world I observe nothing but expediency and opportunism. No one is prepared to sacrifice, to run risks. The love between O’Bane and me was an epic of self-sacrifice, and it ran its full course. It found its acid test on the day when Sophie Wiles joined our company at Leeds.”

He stood up, and his voice trembled in a low whisper. Looking at Alice, he said:

“She was as beautiful, as fragile, as adorable as you are, mademoiselle. Strange how these great secrets are conveyed imperceptibly. O’Bane and I looked at each other, and instinctively we understood. We said nothing. We made no comment about her. We were entirely solicitous of each other’s feelings. We referred to her as ‘Miss Wiles’ and we addressed her as ‘Miss Wiles.’ Before we had been three weeks on the road I knew that if I had not known O’Bane’s feelings I should have gone to her and said, ‘Sophie, my darling, my angel, I love you, I adore you. Will you marry me?’ But would it have been chivalrous to do this, knowing O’Bane’s sentiments? We were two months on the road

before the matter reached its climax. And during that time — under an unspoken compact — neither of us made love to Sophie. And then, one night, I could bear it no longer. I saw the drawn and hungry look in my colleague's eye as he watched her from the wings. I went up to him and whispered, 'Old fellow, go in and win. She's worthy of you.' He understood me at once, and he pressed my hand. 'Colly,' he said, 'you're right. This can't go on. Meet me after the show and come round to my rooms.' "

The old actor's lips were trembling. He drew his chair nearer to my wife's. "I cannot tell you of the heart-burning interview I had with my old friend that night. Each tried to give way to the other. It was very terrible, very moving. At length we decided that the only solution would be to put the matter to a hazard. We could not cut cards or throw dice. It seemed profane. We decided to play a game of chess. We set out the pieces and began. But at the end of a few moments it was apparent that each was trying to let the other win. 'Stay,' I said; 'we must leave the verdict to impartial destiny, after all,' and I rose. On the sideboard — as it might be here — was a large bowl of Gloire-de-Dijon roses. I took the largest bloom and said, 'Terry, old boy, if there are an odd number of petals in this rose, she is yours. If an even number, I will pay her court.' He agreed. Slowly and deliberately, petal by petal, I destroyed the beautiful bloom. There were fifty-eight petals. When Terry saw the last petal fall he turned white and swayed. I helped him

to the easy-chair and handed him a little grog. It was nearly dawn. Already the birds were twittering on the window-sill."

He turned and gazed at the window as though even now the magic of that early morning was upon him.

"The dawn was clear for me, but for my friend how dark and foreboding! Or so it seemed to both of us at that hour. But, as Mahomet said, 'With women, life is a condition of flux.' At eleven o'clock that morning I was on my bended knees to Sophie. I poured out all my pent-up feelings of the two months. There are some things too sacred to repeat even to those who are — dear to us."

He gasped and, stretching out his arm, poured out another glass of the Chartreuse.

"She refused me, or if she did not actually refuse me — indeed, she did not; she was sympathetic, almost loving, but so — indeterminate that I was almost driven to a frenzy of despair. When one is young, one is like that. One must have all, and at once, or go crazy with despair. For a week I courted her day and night, and I could not make her decide. She liked me, but she did not love me. At the end of that time, I went to O'Bane, and I said, 'Old man, it is your call. My part is played.' Under great pressure from me he consented to enter the lists, and I withheld my hand as he had done. Even now the memory of that week of anguish when I knew that my greatest friend was making love to my adored is almost unbearable. At the end of the week he came to me and said, 'Old boy,

I don't know how I stand. She likes me, but I hardly think she loves me.' I will not burden you with the chronicle of our strange actions which followed. We decided that as the question was identical it should be an open fight in a fair field, otherwise, between us, we should lose her altogether. We would both pay court to her wherever and whenever the opportunity occurred. And we would do so without animosity or ill-will. The tour lasted three months, and I knew that O'Bane was winning. There was no question about it. He was the favorite. Every minute I was expecting to hear the dread glad tidings. And then a strange thing happened."

He leant back in his chair and passed his hands through his hair with a graceful gesture.

"An uncle in Australia died and left O'Bane an enormous fortune. He was rich beyond the dreams of avarice. The company all knew of it, and were delighted, all — all except one person."

He glanced towards my wife, and sighed.

"I have lived a good many years, and yet I seem to find the heart of woman as unfathomable, as unexplorable as ever. They are to me the magic casements opening on the night. There is no limit . . . every subtle human experience is capable of endless variation. Sophie refused to marry O'Bane because people would think she married him for his money. The anguish of those last weeks I shall never forget. She definitely refused him, and I was torn between my love for O'Bane and my love for Sophie. I can say with perfect truth —

literal truth — that the fortune killed O'Bane. When we arrived in London, he began to squander. He drank, gambled, and led a depraved life, all because the woman he loved would not marry him. In the spring he left the company and took a house in town. It became the happy hunting-ground of loose characters. It is needless to say that if Sophie wouldn't marry him, there were plenty of other women willing to marry a young millionaire. He became entangled with a fast and pretty creature called Annabel Peacock. He married her, and in the following year they had a child."

The fire crackled on the hearth; my wife did not take her eyes from the old actor's face. A black cat strolled leisurely across the room and stretched itself before the fire. He continued:

"It was then that I experienced an entirely novel vision of woman's character. Sophie, who would not marry O'Bane because he was rich, and who shivered with disgust in the presence of Annabel Peacock, developed an amazing affection and interest for their child. We were out again in the Capacity Company. I had her all to myself. I laid siege to her heart. I was patient, tactful, importunate, imploring, passionate. But it was all no good, my boy . . . no good at all. Heigho! would you believe it? — for ten years of my life from that date I was that woman's slave, and she was the slave of Terry's child. Company after company I joined in order to be with her. I gave up good parts. I sacrificed leads, and in fact I even accepted a walk-on — anything to be with Sophie. Sophie, who

would not listen to me, who treated me like a little pet, to run hither and thither, and who spent all her money and time on toys and clothes for Terry's child. Would you believe it?"

To my surprise, my wife spoke for the first time. She said: "Yes."

Branker looked at her keenly, and nodded.

"Yes. In any affair between a man and a woman, a man finds himself at a disadvantage. Mademoiselle, you see, understands. Women have all kinds of mysterious intuitions and senses which we wot not of. She is armed at every point. She has more resources. She is better-equipped than man. Sophie even made a friend of Annabel. She wrote her loving letters and called her 'my dearest.' For you must know that two years after his marriage my old friend Terry O'Bane went under. He awakened one night feeling ill; he groped in a chest where he usually kept a flask of brandy. He took a gulp. The liquid he drew into his throat was pure liquid ammonia which Annabel had been using for photographic work. She was a keen amateur photographer. He rushed out into the street in his pajamas, and died in the arms of a policeman at the corner."

The horror of this episode was written plainly in the old man's face. He delivered it with a kind of dramatic despair, as though he knew it had to be told and he could not control himself. Then he seemed to fall to pieces, and lay huddled at the back of his chair. I looked at Alice furtively, and I could see

a tear swimming on the brink of her eye. It was some moments before he could continue.

"These were all the best years of my life, *mes enfants*, when my powers were at their highest. My old friend Toole offered me a good part in London. He said to me, 'Brancher, old man, you're wasting yourself in the provinces. Come to town and take a lead.' I could only press his hand and thank him. In another week or two I was on the road again with Sophie. As the years went by she became more and more absorbed by Terry's unattractive child, and more and more distressed concerning it. For you must know that in spite of his profligate life, Terry still had left a considerable fortune, and Annabel continued to live in the same way. And it was the worst possible atmosphere to bring a child up in. Annabel was kind to the child in a spasmodic way, passionate and unreliable. She would pet it and coax it, and buy it expensive toys and dresses, and then suddenly neglect or scold it. Sophie knew this, and all the time she could spare she went to London and tried to help the situation. She humored and flattered Annabel, who was quite manageable if you treated her like this, and she did what she could to influence the early training of the child for good. But, as you may imagine, the little minx grew up the spit and image of her mother. She was vain, fickle, and spoilt. By the time she was ten she thought of nothing but her looks and her frocks; and she was indeed a very pretty child. She had all the prettiness of her mother, with something of her father's grace and

charm. She was encouraged to amuse the vulgar people who came to the house, and she was allowed to listen to all the loose talk, and to sit up to any hour she liked, unless Annabel happened to be in a contrary mood, when she would slap the child and lock her in her room.

“ ‘Aunt Sophie,’ as she called her, was a favorite with Lucy, but only, I’m afraid, because ‘Aunt Sophie’ gave her expensive toys, and lavished her love persistently upon the child. She wrote to her nearly every day, wherever she happened to be, and sent her little gifts.”

The old man mopped his forehead. He was evidently laboring under the severe strain which the invoking of these memories put upon him. He walked to the sideboard and poured himself out a glass of water, into which he poured — an *as after-thought* — a tiny drop of rum. After taking two long, meditative gulps, he resumed his seat: He seemed to have forgotten all about our presence. He was living in the past. But suddenly he turned to my wife and said:

“I have many of the beautiful frocks which Sophie made for little Lucy. They have come down to me. If it would not bore you to call one afternoon, *mademoiselle*, I could show you some that might interest you.” There was a strange, eager appeal in his voice. It seemed a matter of tremendous moment that Alice should go and inspect the frocks. My heart bled for him. “Of *course* she will go,” I thought, but to my surprise, she said nothing. She just looked at him with

that queer, watchful expression that women alone are capable of. Perhaps it is part of what the old chap referred to — their equipment. She toyed with the chain on her frock, and his eye meditated her movements. He hesitated, and then rather nervously proceeded, as though talking to himself.

"Frocks! What a part they play in our lives. Carlyle was right. Sophie was extraordinarily clever with her needle. She had a genius for combining materials. Her theatrical experience helped her. She made the most alluring frocks. The child adored 'Aunt Sophie's' frocks. They always looked so striking and so professional. The crisis in my life, and which I am about to tell you of, was indeed occasioned by one of the frocks which Sophie made for Lucy. It came about in this way."

He paused again, and tapped the top of the table with his beautiful white hands.

"That last year — that year when Lucy reached her tenth birthday — the excesses in Annabel's house reached their zenith. The place became notorious. Annabel had taken to herself a drunken lord, Lord Starborough. He was a dissipated young *roué*. He rather took a fancy to Lucy, and he spoilt her in the same way that Annabel did. We heard stories of the goings on. The child was taken to houses to dance. I believe she was even taught to put on rouge. There was a rich family called the Arkwrights, who also had children, and who lived a similar life. These children were Lucy's great friends. They vied with each other

in their infantile snobbery. The parents gave elaborate parties and tried to outshine each other in the lavishness of their entertainment, and the overdressing of the children. It was very, very painful. Even I, whose life was being wrecked by Sophie's adulation of this child, felt sorry. My heart bled for my old friend's daughter.

"We had a long tour that autumn, Sophie and I. We were out in 'The Woman Who Failed.' Sophie had a lead, but I was only playing the part of a butler. It was a long and trying tour up North. The weather was very bitter. There was a good deal of sickness, and our chief was a hard man. Early in December Sophie caught a cold which rapidly developed into bronchitis. She had a narrow escape. She was, however, only out of the bill for ten days. She insisted on returning and struggling on. The tour was to end on Christmas Eve. One day she had a letter from Lucy. I remember the exact words to this day. 'Dear Aunt Sophie, do make me a lovely frock for Christmas Eve. The Arkwrights are having a lovely ball, and I know Irene is having a gold and green, with a sparkling veil. Your loving Lucy.'

"When Sophie got this letter she smiled. She was happy. She was always happy when doing a service. Ah! me. . . . For nearly a week she thought and dreamt about the frock she was going to make for Lucy for the Arkwrights' party. She knew what the child wanted — a frock to outshine all the others. Then another story reached us. I have forgotten what it was:

some distressing record of these Arkwright people. One night after the show she sent for me. I could tell she was very agitated. She clutched my arm, and said, 'Old man, I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to make Lucy a frock which will outshine all the others. And it will be just a plain white frock, with no adornment of any sort. Just think of it,— amongst all those vulgar, overdressed children, one little girl, as pretty as Lucy,— in plain white. And they will be bound to appreciate it. It will tell. And perhaps she will realize — what it means. Good taste and refinement will always tell against vulgarity.' I applauded Sophie's idea, and I went with her to get the material. But she fainted in the shop. During those last few days I began to realize that Sophie was very ill. She was simply living on her nervous force, keeping herself going in order to complete the tour, and to deliver Lucy's frock in time for the ball.

"Our last journey back was from Nottingham. We arrived in London at five o'clock on Christmas Eve. I was in a fever of dread. I believed that Sophie was dying. She kept swaying in the train as though she was going to drop. Her face was deadly-white, her eyes unnaturally bright, and her fingers were still busy on the frock. So absorbed had I been in Sophie's affairs, I had made no arrangements about lodgings in town. Neither had she. But my old friend, Joe Gadgers, seeing my distress, said, 'Old boy, leave it to me. I know a snug little place where they'll take you in. I'm not stopping. I'm going straight through to Hast-

ings.' I thanked my old friend and embraced him. When we got to Euston, we got Sophie into a four-wheeled cab, and Joe Gadders came with us to arrange the introduction. I hardly noticed where the lodgings were — somewhere in Clapham, I think. We arrived there, and a good lady took us in without hesitation. We put Sophie to bed. She was almost delirious, but still the frock was not quite finished. Joe left us, and I sat by her bedside, watching her busy fingers. I knew it was useless to protest. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked, and outside the snow was beginning to fall."

Colin Brancker stood up, and suddenly picked up the little white frock from the back of the chair. He held it in his arms reverently and tenderly. His voice was strong and resonant. He stood there, and acted the scene vividly before our eyes.

"At ten minutes to seven I left the house, holding the frock in my arms. I rushed out without a hat, without a coat. I flew along the street, calling out for a cab like a madman. . . . At last I got one. I told the driver to drive like the furies to the address I gave him in Kensington. In the cab I stamped my feet and rocked the dress in my arms as though it were a fevered child. I don't know how we got there. It seemed an eternity. I flung into the house, calling out, 'Lucy! Lucy!' I found her in the drawing-room. She was dressed in a flaming orange and silver dress, with a sparkling tiara in her hair. She was looking in a mirror and putting finishing touches to her hair.

She cried out when she saw me: 'Hullo! I thought Aunt Sophie had forgotten me. I've hired a frock from Roco's.' 'Child,' I said, 'your Aunt Sophie has been working out her life's blood for you. Here is the frock.' She grabbed it and examined it. 'Frock!' she said. 'It looks more like a nightdress. I don't want the beastly old thing'; and she threw it across the room. I believe at that moment I could have struck the child. I was blind with fury. Fortunately, I remembered in time that she was my old friend Terry O'Bane's daughter. I picked up the frock. 'Ungrateful child!' I exclaimed. 'You don't know what you're doing. You're murdering an ideal. You're killing your aunt.' She tossed her insolent head and actually pressed the bell for the butler to see me out. Just like a grown-up person. Dazed and baffled, I clutched the little white frock and staggered out into the street. The night was dark, and the snow was still falling. Christmas bells were beginning to peal. . . . I plunged on and on, my heart beating against my ribs. People stared at me, but I was too distressed to care. How could I go back to Sophie with the insulting message? Suddenly, at the corner of Hyde Park, a most appalling realization flashed through my mind. *I had made no note of the address of the lodgings where Sophie and I were staying!* . . . God in heaven! What was I to do? The only man who could help me, my old friend, Joe Gadgers, had gone to Hastings. What could I do? Could I go to the police and say, 'Will you help me to find the address of some lodgings where an actress is

staying? I think it's somewhere round about Clapham. I don't know the name of the landlady, or the name of the street, or the number?' They would have thought I was mad. Perhaps I was mad. Should I go back to Lucy? The child wouldn't know. . . . And all this time Sophie was dying. Ah! merciful God! perhaps she would die. If she died before I found her, she would die in the happy belief that the frock had been worn. Her last hours would be blessed with dreams, visions of purity and joy . . . whilst I . . . I should have no place in them, perhaps . . . but I, too, after all, I'd suffered for her sake. Who knows? . . . Who know . . . ?"

His voice broke off in a low sob. I leant forward watching his face, racked with anguish. The room was extraordinarily still. . . . I dared not look at Alice, but I was conscious of the pearly sheen of her frock under the lamp. Away in the distance one could hear the rumble of the traffic on the High-road. The remorseless tick of the clock was the only sound in the room. Once I thought it ticked louder, and then I realized that it was some one tapping gently at the door. The door opened a little way, and against the dim light in the passage appeared the gaunt face of the old serving-woman, phantom-like, unreal. . . .

"Excuse me, sir." She peered into the room. The old actor gazed at her with unseeing eyes. He stood with one hand on the back of the chair, and across the other arm lay the white frock; a dignified and pathetic figure.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir."

"Yes, Mrs. Windsor?"

"My little niece 'as just called. I can't find it anywhere — that little frock I made for 'er last week. I put it in the chest. I thought perhaps you might 'ave . . . Oh! there it is, sir. Do you mind —? Thank you very much, sir. I'm sorry to have disturbed the company."

In the sanctuary of our bedroom that night, my wife said:

"Did you really believe that that writing on the photograph was by Henry Irving?"

"My dear," I answered, "when their careers are finished, the painter, the author, the architect or the sculptor may point to this or that, and say, 'Lo! this is my handiwork.' But to the actor nothing remains but — memories. Their permanence lies in the memories of those who loved them. Are we to begrudge them all the riches of imagination? After all, what is the line of demarcation between what we call reality and what we call imagination? Is not the imagery invoked by Shelley when he sings of dubious myths as real a fact as the steel rivets in the Forth Bridge? What is reality? Indeed, what is life?"

"I don't know what life is," answered my wife, switching off the light. "But I know what you are. You're a dear old — perfect old — BOOB!"

"Alice, what do you mean?" I said.

She laughed softly.

"Women are 'equipped,' you know," she replied enigmatically, and insisted on going to sleep.